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# OMEGA: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF DEATH AND AFTERLIFE

Clifford C. Cain

Despite the significant interrelationship between theology and death, for the large part of American society death is no longer a theological matter.<sup>1</sup> The religious meanings of death have met *their* demise, and death has become a secular question. The accompanying attitude toward death has been one of denial.

Before their eclipse, these religious understandings placed death on a continuum with life: Humans were born in the image of the Creator, they lived in preparation and anticipation of going to be with God, and they died and went to be with the Giver of new life. One's entire life—and beyond—was secure in the hands of God. At birth a person came from God, and at death would return to be with God.

These understandings facilitated a death-defying stance.<sup>2</sup> All things were regarded as under God's providential care, and even death did not pronounce the last word. The victory flag did not ultimately go to death.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites viewed death in connection with their concept of life. Since life was regarded as a unit of power, death was understood as the "spilling out" of life. The dead were therefore an echo of life, a shadow of vitality. As the state of being which involved a complete scattering of vital power, death became known as the weakest form of existence: "The dead exist, but they do not live."<sup>3</sup> And, at the end, life would conquer death through the resurrection of the dead body. Resurrection in the Old Testament sense would assume the form of restoration (what was lost would be regained).

In the New Testament understanding of death (before it became Hellenized with the dualism of the immortality of the soul), death meant a ceasing to be of the whole person. The resurrection of the body would once again defeat death, but in this instance resurrection would assume the form of transformation (the body would be changed into a new entity—a "spiritual body").

The importance of these Old Testament and New Testament perspectives is not only that they proclaim victory over death, but also that they stress that death is total. Everything about the person dies at death. Death dispossesses a person of all the reality he or she has. Death declares all things to be finished. In short, a person lives as a whole, dies as a whole, and is given new life as a whole person.

The work of Martin Heidegger provides a significant impetus for this undenying of death and the acceptance of one's mortality implicit in the biblical



perspective. For Heidegger, dying means “going-out-of-the-world and losing one’s Being-in-the-world.”<sup>5</sup> Death is an existential phenomenon which means “ending” [for Heidegger, the “ending” of “Dasein” (i.e., of Being-in-the-world)], the ending of living. Death is therefore a natural phenomenon of life. It is part and parcel of life. It stands before all humans as something impending. There is the ever-present possibility of death. Heidegger captures this understanding with the point, “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.”<sup>6</sup> Or, as Daniel Day Williams has put it, “God created a good world of finite things, and death is one mark of that finitude.”<sup>7</sup>

Since the death of others is something that a person notes or directly experiences, he or she can accept death as an undeniable “fact of experience.” “It is an expected and integral part of life.”<sup>8</sup> Because personal existence is essentially existence with others (social existence), the person gains an awareness of his or her own mortality. And those who work with dying persons (e.g., the caregiving minister) are confronted blatantly by their own mortality.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the death of others reminds one that he or she will die, and consequently, that his or her time is limited.

Rudolf Bultmann developed this theme of Heidegger’s in a useful way: Bultmann recognized that a person gains consciousness of his or her own mortality in sharing life with others and experiencing the death of some of the others. He went on to suggest that the acceptance of the inevitability of one’s own death is the impetus for true living in the present. Bultmann termed this true living “authentic existence.” According to his perspective, a person cognizant of his or her own eventual death is moved to find his or her authentic existence by being dependent upon God rather than by seeking security in his or her own resources. “The authentic life means the abandonment of all self-contained security.”<sup>10</sup>

Bultmann regards the resurrection of the dead as a myth. He contends that it has little to do with standard assumptions about the afterlife. Rather, the resurrection myth is concerned with producing a quality of life (“authentic existence”) *now* in the present. The meaning behind the myth of resurrection, then, is that the quality of eternity is present now in the love which trusts God and God’s goodness. And because God is trustworthy, complete trust in God brings a person to authentic existence. For Bultmann, as for others,<sup>11</sup> the character of God is the central point here and not whether mortals have an essence that survives death.

The New Testament speaks of authentic existence as “life in faith” or “life after the Spirit,” and these must be based on faith in the grace of God. Paul Irión’s words make an unintended contribution to the discussion: “The resurrection in New Testament understanding is not so much for the making or remaking of new substances as it is the creation of a new relationship with God.”<sup>12</sup> This “new relationship” in the context of authentic existence is not *post-mortem*, but

existential.

This same emphasis upon the present is voiced by John Robinson in his book, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*.<sup>13</sup> Although he indicates that the *completion* of the transformation must wait until the *parousia*, he argues that "the resurrection of the body starts at baptism, when a Christian becomes 'one Spirit' (i.e., one spiritual body) with the Lord (I Cor. 6:17) and 'puts on (the body of Christ)' (Gal. 3:27), 'the new man' which 'has been created' (Eph. 4:24) and 'is being renewed...after the image of him that created him.' (Col. 3:10)."<sup>14</sup>

For Daniel Day Williams, scriptural passages such as Romans 6:11, Colossians 3:3, and John 17:3 are assertions of resurrection life as present experience.<sup>15</sup> Even though they also anticipate the future being with God, and although the symbol of resurrection points to life beyond physical death, they affirm that new life begins now.

In fact, the Gospel according to John pushes the future life to the margin and emphasizes the presence of eternal life now. Believing in Jesus now and having the Spirit's "new birth" brings "new life," which is eternal life (3:15; 5:24; 11:1-44). Jesus brings eternal life to the present. Resurrection is not a future event for the dead, but a present possibility for those who believe that Jesus himself is resurrection and life (11:25). The event of Jesus "opens the choice of eternal life or continued existence as living dead."<sup>16</sup> The overriding concern for the Gospel according to John, then, is the quality of existence and not its quantity. Eternal life is not extended existence or simply something that never ends.

Rosemary Ruether, in her study of "the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting,"<sup>17</sup> observes that from the first century to the sixteenth, Christianity regarded the present world as a trial or testing for the soul. The present world was merely and primarily regarded as a place of sojourn for the pilgrim who was estranged from the higher, heavenly world. Then with the Renaissance came a shift in consciousness. This earth was regarded as home, and existence upon it had meaning as true life. As a result, the present world became the arena of human fulfillment.

In the same way, in nineteenth and twentieth-century theology (roughly from Schleiermacher to Tillich), one notices a bent toward the communion of the finite with the infinite and the temporal with the eternal. This communion is seen not in terms of a literal eschatology of life after death, but as a quality of life in relationship to the eternal here and now.

What this means in biblical language is that the Spirit offers the possibility of new life which is opened up by faith (Gal. 5:16, 25; Rom. 8:14). The fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) are characteristic of the new life. "Eternal life—love, joy, peace, freedom—[is] already present."<sup>18</sup> And so, faith involves a "working through love" (Gal. 5:6), and this means being a new creation (Gal. 6:15). This new life is given now, not after death (II Cor. 5:17; John 5:24).

As a result, a means of coping with the fear of death has been provided. The existentialist theme is that the honest confrontation of death and the apprehending of authentic existence are bound together. Authentic existence—true living, renewed life, fruitful living, new life—means a life thoroughly involved in a faithful relationship with God. Resurrection has as its primary purpose the production and enabling of such faith, and as its result, the signifying not of death, but life.

Carl Braaten, however, has questioned the “good news” of such an understanding.<sup>19</sup> According to his view, the core of Christian eschatology is the victory of God over the last enemy of life—death itself. Eternal life *is* present now, *but* life beyond death is given by God to a fulfilling future (Rom. 4:17). On the contrary, Bultmann and friends contend that death is absolute; and therefore, existence is given an absolute meaning. The future dimension of new life is eclipsed by its present reality. Braaten wants to argue that existence is not divested of all meaning by removing the absoluteness of death through an affirmation of an afterlife. He does assert that eternal life is present now, but still maintains the traditional view of a final victory over death and an absolute fulfillment of meaning in the *future* life.

Paul Irion has suggested that the hope for the resurrection is the means by which the Christian copes with death.<sup>20</sup> Ernest Becker insists that the affirmation of the transcendent is the only way to conquer death.<sup>21</sup> So does Liston Mills.<sup>22</sup> The basic line of argument in Braaten, Irion, Becker, and Mills is that death makes one question the audacity of any statement about the goodness of life. Death has the “last say.” Death brings to the surface the deep dilemma of life: Life is most often not just; so is it really worth it? Do human efforts have a real meaning and value? Does anything finally count? From whence comes ultimate fulfillment? Death, then, is an evil to be overcome.

The Christian tradition gives an assurance of the conquest of death. The Christian faith meets death with the affirmation that God overcomes this threat to fulfillment by the resurrection of the body and eternal life with God. All life is brought to judgment and fulfillment in God’s kingdom. Human existence is thus put in a perspective which transcends the “final curtain” of death. Life comes through death (Phil. 2:6f). Resurrection can only come *through* death; and in resurrection, life conquers death.

Consequently, death does not hold the winning hand. Good wins out, justice prevails, love triumphs. There is a victory for those things which give life meaning.

Implicit in all of this is the necessity of transcendence. Becker affirms that death summons human beings to the gate of transcendence or despair.<sup>23</sup> But given the necessity of transcendence, it is still incumbent to define that transcendence. Must transcendence be defined in the traditional terms of resurrection of

the body and eternal life with their traditional meanings intact? Is there an understanding of eternal life which preserves a notion of transcendence and is still consistent with an emphasis on present existence? Is the only triumph of life over death a matter of literal prolongation of the conscious self beyond the grave? Is there a way of marrying two apparent opposites—Christian faith with its need for transcendence in the future and the existentialists' need for authentic living in the present?

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has provided a seminal idea which may be termed the "eternal return."<sup>24</sup> Because of his metaphysical view, Whitehead believed that a person "perishes subjectively" but is "immortal objectively."<sup>25</sup> This understanding views both life and death as occurrences in relationship with God. Life is lived in response to the goodness of God, and persons are lured by God's love to do God's will (i. e., God's intentions for the world). Death marks the conclusion of life, but after death, persons remain "stubborn facts."<sup>26</sup> For at death, the goodness of the person returns to God and enhances the divine life (the eternal return). The quality of the life that ended, the "trueness" of the existence (its genuineness and authenticity) pleases God, makes God joyful. And the person is valued, appreciated, celebrated, and remembered by God. For the goodness in that person reflects that he or she has responded positively and appropriately to God's goodness and grace. God has loved that person; and that person has loved others, rejoicing with those who rejoiced and weeping with those who wept (Rom. 12:15). Since that person has sought to live life in qualitatively meaningful ways, then that person has lived authentically. And, as Daniel Day Williams describes it, "Every achievement of good, of value, of meaning increases the richness in God's being."<sup>27</sup>

Humans' "survival" after death, their "afterlife," then, depends not on a literal resurrection or a soul existing in bliss in heaven; rather, it depends upon the fact "that everyone is called by God to a unique and eternal relationship with Himself."<sup>28</sup> For God exercises a "tender care that nothing be lost."<sup>29</sup> Death *is* followed by a "going to be with God," a "meeting with God," but certainly not in the traditional sense. As the Psalmist declares, "Afterwards Thou wilt take me in glory (73:25)." "The Psalmist believes that God will care for him in death as in life, that he will be present to him."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, "nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:39)," and "whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God (Rom. 14:8)." As a result, love is not destroyed in the face of, or by the fact of, death.

And the deceased has "eternal life"—not eternal life in the traditional understanding, but rather, in light of God's remembering that person. He or she is an eternal memory in God's mind and a participant in God's life. This is not a dualistic understanding of life after death, for the soul does not leave or escape from the body to fly or flee to eternal rest with God. The whole person—an

embodied soul—has ceased to live. The total person is subject to the rule of death.

Nor is it an understanding of the resurrection of the body, whether rejoined by the soul in restoration or transformed into a new “heavenly body.” Rather, according to this view, the literal resurrection of the body is not a historical fact. This new understanding of “resurrection” does not mean that the dead get back what they lost through death; for it is neither reinstitution nor reappearance.

In a certain sense, this new understanding could be termed “immortality,” but not in the dualistic mode of the traditional perception. The concept involves “immortality” in the sense that the deceased is not ever forgotten by God. Death is not the “end” of the person, for he or she “lives on” in the memory and life of God.

James Lapsley comments on the subject of salvation to the same end. “Life after death” or “immortality” may be substituted for his word “salvation.”

Salvation refers primarily to the preservation in the mind of God of the values realized in the lives of persons. What is saved is not the entity of the person (whether conceived in bodily or spiritual terms), but rather his personhood (i. e., the qualities...of his person [that] represent the contribution he has made to the stream of life). These qualities are preserved as active dimensions in the life of God, contributing to his development.<sup>31</sup>

Eternal life is ultimately salvation in the life of God. One is able to face death as the natural conclusion to his or her life because ultimately one’s personal values, goodness, and loving qualities will be retained in the divine life.

And what about ultimate fulfillment? Daniel Day Williams expresses an answer in this way:

Certainly we are not to think of the new life with God as an indefinite extension of this creaturely existence. No, it is our participation in the ongoing life of God. It means that what counts in human life is not lost or wasted or rejected.<sup>32</sup>

Mortals have a transcendent dimension, and because of this, will be fulfilled.

Does this mean that there is no Last Judgment? No, it does not; but the “judgment” is different from the traditional comprehension. “Judgment” customarily refers to the end of time when Jesus will come again to evaluate the living and the dead according to their good or evil deeds. The result is one of two destinations: The righteous, good people will go to eternal glory (to be with God in blessedness and eternal bliss); the wicked, evil people will be sent to perpetual punishment (to be with the Devil in eternal damnation and fiery torment).

“Judgment” in the new interpretation is significantly different. But there is

judgment. The affirmation of any understanding of eternal life must include judgment. In Søren Kierkegaard's words, "Immortality means judgment, for it is the meeting of human and divine."<sup>33</sup> The new understanding of judgment takes the form of the separation of the good in a person from the bad. As mentioned previously, the good goes to God and becomes a stimulating and remembered part of God's life. The bad disappears into nothingness. This means that eternal life is not a self-centered, selfishly hedonistic, narcissistic, everlasting enjoyment. But instead, as with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it is a rejoicing in the vision and sharing of God.

To look at this from another angle, Irion's distinction between *sarx* and *soma* or between *sarx* and *pneuma* may be introduced.<sup>34</sup> *Sarx* refers to the whole person in the state of separation or alienation from God. *Soma* and *pneuma*, although etymologically referring to different dimensions of the totality of a person, refer to the whole person in positive relationship to God. Thus, *sarx* on the one hand, and *soma* and *pneuma* on the other, represent two opposing qualities of relationship with God. The corpse of a deceased person represents both perspectives. In an analogous way to the discussion on judgment, then, *sarx* symbolizes that which will evaporate into nothingness (the bad in a person), and *soma* and *pneuma* symbolize that which will return to God (the good in a person).

Two objections may be raised to this understanding of death and afterlife. First, because in this notion of afterlife the whole person is not "alive" in the strict sense of the word, the case may be set forth that this would not constitute an adequate or satisfactory fulfillment, and that therefore one ought to adopt a narcissistic life style before it is too late. Prudence would hedonistically seem to tell one to get all he or she can in life—while it can still be gotten.

However, this "advice" or philosophy would not constitute wisdom, but sin. Getting all one can (as a result of the confrontation with one's own mortality) would involve a quest for tangible realities, for temporary pleasures and meanings, and the clinging to transitory objects. In doing this, a person would shut out the eternal presence of God from his or her life (and this would constitute alienation—*sarx*—sin). Faithful living and authentic existence involve obedience and a resolve to trust in God alone. This requires self-commitment, not self-service.

Second, one may conclude that this concept of death and afterlife is no different from a secular viewpoint. And therefore, it is not Christian.

Modern secular mentality sees humans as the unity of mind and body. The mind is a function of the body, and a person's consciousness is a product of physical function alone. Because of this, all of a human being's nature is reduced to material dimensions. As a result, there are no transcendent elements in human-kind.

This secular viewpoint is obviously different from the traditional view of Christianity (i.e., the whole person not only dies, but also the whole person is



given new life); and it also diverges from the concept of eternal return. A transcendent element *is* present in the concept of death and afterlife being proposed. It has been described earlier as the return of the goodness in a person to God and a fulfillment that is completed. This means that death does not have the final say nor is death ultimately the "final curtain." Although death is the end of life as one knows it and lives it, there is still the eternal return which transcends death, thereby conquering it.

To summarize briefly, in facing death and accepting it, one finds meaning in life through authentic existence. In recognizing and affirming eternal life as reinterpreted in this discussion of afterlife, one can find ultimate meaning in life and fulfillment through participation in, and being remembered by, the divine Reality.

One final thought—a humbling and cautious thought—must be expressed. *Any* understanding of the meaning of death and conception of afterlife is ultimately a matter of faith. For it is an acknowledgment of one's utter dependence upon God.

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## NOTES

1. Robert J. Fulton and Robert Bendiksen, *Death and Identity* (Bowie, MD: Charles Press Publishers, Inc., 1976), pp.3-4; Liston O. Mills, ed., *Perspectives on Death* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 7-11.
2. Paul E. Irion, *The Funeral: Vestige or Value?* (Salem, NH: Arno Press, 1977), p. 22.
3. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
4. This statement categorically rules out any form of dualism, whether it be the notion that body and soul are separated at death and then rejoined as new life in an exact reproduction of present life or that the soul is joined in a new body to provide an utterly different identity. For example, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's dualistic statement, "There is no total death. Only the body dies. The self or spirit...is eternal," is punctured [see E. Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 161].
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 281.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
7. Daniel Day Williams, *The Minister and the Care of Souls* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 139.
8. Kübler-Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
9. David Barton, ed., *Dying and Death: A Clinical Guide for Caregivers* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, Co., 1977), pp. 72-73.
10. Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (London: S. P. C. K.,

- 1957), p. 19.
11. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
12. Irion, *op. cit.*, p. 157.
13. John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Geneva, AL: Allenson, Inc., 1952), pp. 79f.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
16. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
17. Robert A. Evans and Thomas D. Parker, eds., *Christian Theology: A Case Method Approach* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 256f.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Irion, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
21. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), pp. 24, 203-204, 258.
22. Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-11.
23. Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
24. Alfred North Whitehead, "Immortality" (Ingersoll Lecture), Harvard Divinity School, April 22, 1941: Found in Paul A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1941), pp. 682-700; Alfred North Whitehead, *Essays in Science and Philosophy* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 117.
25. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventure of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1933), p. 305.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 305; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. ix.
27. Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 109.
28. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
29. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, pp. 524-525.
30. Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 201-202.
31. James Lapsley, *Salvation and Health* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 53.
32. Williams, *The Minister and the Care of Souls*, p. 140.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
34. Irion, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-150.